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Perilous Journeys: Ron Baron and Karina Aguilera Skvirsky at Smack Mellon

by David Brody

Ron Baron: *Beyond-Beyond* and Karina Aguilera Skvirsky: *The Perilous Journey of María Rosa Palacios*, at Smack Mellon Gallery

September 23 to November 5, 2017

92 Plymouth Street at Washington Street

Brooklyn (DUMBO), smackmellon.org



Ron Baron, *Beyond-Beyond*, 2017. Installation, cast ceramic, dimensions variable. Installed at Smack Mellon Gallery

Ron Baron's installation *Beyond-Beyond* is centered in Smack Mellon's completely darkened main space, where nearly a hundred ghostly ceramic casts of shoes, boots and other footwear are delicately placed in small islands of light on the concrete floor. Facing forward in pairs or combinations, the ensemble suggests a vaporized march of refugees — with overtones, resonating in the cavernous darkness, of both the Holocaust and the Rapture. On entering the space, the vibe is forbidding, but approaching closely one sees that each unglazed white sculpture is nuanced and inventive, even playful in a biting Surrealist way, as in weird meltings, slicings, piercings, and fetish-style nailings. At the same time, Baron's finely expressive casting lends each leathery rumple and untied shoelace the quality of portraiture, so that a neatly sliced pair of loafers with baby shoes nestled inside becomes tenderly tragic.

In some cases the crucifixion-size nails pin shoes through, unambiguously evoking the Passion, which seems either heavy-handed or, given the Surrealist context, too glib, but the lack of tact is clearly intended. Certainly it distinguishes this work from the generally chilly use of casting in contemporary art, as with Christian Marclay's 1990 *Boneyard* (to take an example currently on view, at Paula Cooper), in which hundreds of white Hydrocal clones of an old telephone receiver (the corded kind, but dis-corded), scatter across a gallery floor, perhaps evoking — despite accidental couplings and menages — the death of communication. Baron's work is far from being dispassionate in this conceptual manner. Even aside from the nails, his investment of sculptural curiosity and skill in individual pieces raises the temperature — which is, however, modulated overall by the spectral restraint and gravity of the installation, the uniqueness of each piece taking its place within a larger fate. The empty shoes, of course, imply the people imprinted in them, and *Beyond-Beyond* is eloquent about the pain of absence; that is, personally mournful and also universally elegiac about what might be the vanishing footprint of the entire family of man.



Karina Aguilera Skvirsky, *The Perilous Journey of María Rosa Palacios*, 2016. Video, 30 minutes. Courtesy of the Artist

In the small gallery, Karina Aguilera Skvirsky's film *The Perilous Journey of María Rosa Palacios* re-enacts the artist's great-grandmother's migration, at the age of 14 and mostly on foot, from the interior to the coast of Ecuador in 1906. The 30-minute video is paced meditatively, assembled from extended shots that give just the right amount of information and which unfold with a kind of grandeur that stays with you. Early on we see a close up of the artist's hair, a living emblem of her Afro-Ecuadoran heritage, as it is painfully combed out and knotted into traditional braids. These she wears, along with traditional dress and gear, for the remainder of her journey on foot, mule, train and boat. An expository conversation with an elderly relative whom the artist had never met is compelling and bittersweet. A patient vista of a train winding around the flank of a mountain, distorted by the Andean distance, imparts the illusion of the train cars bending like a caterpillar. One long take involves an unseen man directing the artist as she walks up a stony village street. It declares, with cinematic deliberation, that we are not watching a documentary — no matter how moving the personal story and fascinating the travelogue. A final handheld shot accompanies the artist as she arrives at the thriving fish market of her port city destination. It is impoverished by first world standards, but at the end of this compressed, somewhat cryptic epic, the place seems more civilized, the people more decent than in any city in America.

